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Defining Early Modern Pornography:

The Case of Venus and Adonis

CHANTELLE THAUVETTE

ABSTRACT

Much of the discussion concerning the history of sexual representation positions pornography as an end product of a modern teleology that links pornography with moral corruption and culminates in the anti-pornography and free speech debates of the late twentieth century. In light of recent changes to the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of the term pornography, this paper argues that pornography's relevance in early modern studies be re-evaluated. Pornography, as a term that conveys at once the sexual and transgressive aspects of a representation, allows us to interrogate the broader relationship between sexuality and morality in the period, and to weigh individual inclinations toward sexual pleasure against societal pressures to conform to the moral codes that regulated sexual conduct. This paper traces the history of the term pornography and then explores how the elements of the current 2006 definition can be recontextualized to reflect early modern views on erotics, aesthetics, and sexuality. It formulates a definition of pornography as a reading process, rather than a genre, and applies this definition to Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis to demonstrate that a pornographic reading of the poem provides insight about the place of sexual pleasure within the sixteenth-century moral order. By replacing the modern distinction between "erotic" and "aesthetic" feelings with a sixteenth-century-appropriate distinction between antisocial lust and prosocial love, this essay argues that Venus and Adonis provides a fantasy of sex without consequences that readers can enjoy while remaining true to their religious, social, and familial responsibilities.

Pornography: i.a. The explicit description or exhibition of sexual subjects or sexual activity in literature, painting, film, etc., in a manner intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings; printed or visual material containing this. (OED)
In the 2006 third edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the definition of *pornography* was revised to include a distinction between the "erotic" and "aesthetic" feelings sexually explicit representations produce in their audiences. While this distinction is not new, its recent inclusion in the definition of pornography invites us to explore sexually explicit early modern literature, such as Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, in a new light. In struggling to reconcile the erotic excess of *Venus and Adonis* with the poem's aesthetic merits, critics from the seventeenth century onwards have drawn on distinctions between aesthetic appreciation and erotic titillation as a means to defend the poem as art or dismiss it as pornography. While considerable attention has been given to the aesthetic effects of the poem, even as they incorporate sexuality, the poem's erotic effects have received less consideration. Do the erotic feelings *Venus and Adonis* stimulates make it a work of "pornography" in light of the 2006 definition? Would its early modern audience have read it as pornography? What might an early modern pornographic reading process have entailed?

The word *pornography* did not make its first English appearance until 1857, and scholars of the early modern period such as Ian Frederick Moulton, James Grantham Turner, and Julie Peakman comment on its limitations as an anachronistic descriptor of seventeenth-century literature. Moulton writes that "[w]hile it is possible (but by no means certain) that the subjective feelings one associates with the pornographic have always existed, the genre has not, and the term itself is a relatively new one" (5). Turner coins the term *pornographia* in his work to "distance it from modern debates and to emphasize its etymological roots" (xii). Turner's *pornographia* focuses specifically on the modern term's fusion of the Greek words for whore and painter in order to discuss the graphic, punitive marking of the "whore" in libertine England. Julie Peakman notes that although France had developed a graphic style by the seventeenth century, "English pornographic work" became "an aim in itself (for the main purpose of sexual excitement) only from the middle of the eighteenth century" (6). The word *pornographic* does make infrequent appearances in early modern scholarship, often to connote the sexually explicit or gratuitous aspects of a text or performance by modern standards, but few studies devote considerable attention to the gap between modern and pre-modern forms of sexual representation. To read early modern literature as pornography therefore requires a definition of the term that takes into account how representations of sex circulated in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, and how such representations fit into the broader social and moral
schemes of the period. This essay recontextualizes the two major components of the OED's 2006 definition—the “explicit” representation of “sexual” content and the distinction between “erotic” and “aesthetic” feelings—to formulate a definition of pornography suitable for the early modern period. In applying this definition to the case of Venus and Adonis, I hope to demonstrate that to read the poem pornographically provides insight into the place of sexual pleasure in the sixteenth-century moral order.

Although “pornography” remains a contentious term in early modern studies, doubts about pornography's applicability have hardly hampered the study of early modern sexual representation, since terms like bawdy and erotic, which move more freely across historical periods, continue to shape our understanding of early modern sexuality. Bawdy and erotic present, however, their own limitations in theorizing how societies represent sexuality. Bawdy may capture the transgressive aspects of a representation (the lewd, the obscene, or the filthy), while erotic may convey its sexual aspects, but neither term on its own can fully convey the concept of transgressive sexuality, since what is bawdy is not necessarily sexual and what is erotic is not necessarily transgressive in all contexts. Pornography, because it considers both sexual representation and its reception, can yoke the transgressive and the sexual together by positing a relationship between a text’s sexual content and the context that makes such content transgressive. As a term, pornography encompasses not only representations of sexual acts, but the relationship between the reader’s affective responses to those acts (amusement, arousal, disgust) and the social constructions of sexual morality, privacy, and propriety that give those acts context as appropriate, entertaining, obscene, or illegal. The circumstances of a sexually explicit representation's circulation and reception add an additional layer of socially contingent meaning to such representations, so that pornography as a term can also highlight social tensions concerning which sexual acts are too transgressive to be represented in certain spaces (private homes, public venues, etc.) or in the presence of certain groups (men, children, women, etc.).

In a modern context, for instance, pornography often operates as an antithesis of art based not on the sexual nature of its content but on a set of socially constructed distinctions between pornographers and artists, sex shops and art galleries, or popular and elite audiences. Distinctions between elite and popular audiences are certainly at work in the initial reception of Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis, but it remains open whether these distinctions paralleled distinctions between art and pornography in the seventeenth century. Philip Sidney
famously argued in *The Defence of Poesie* that courtly poets possessed the greatest power to move their audiences toward moral truth by using art to delight and instruct, and *Venus and Adonis* marks Shakespeare's aspiration to join the ranks of those courtly poets. *Venus and Adonis* was Shakespeare's first work to be published, and its dedication to the Earl of Southampton suggests to Richard Halpern that “Shakespeare wanted to abandon a popular literary form,” playwrighting, “for an elite one” (377). The poem was, however, incredibly popular in its day, going through six editions before 1599 and inspiring numerous imitations on its erotic theme (Duncan-Jones 490). *Venus and Adonis*’s notoriety eventually earned the poem a place on the library shelf of “Love's Academy,” a repository of arousing books imagined by the author of the pseudonymous pseudo-sexual advice pamphlet, *The Practical Part of Love* (1660). The poem's popularity among “amorous young students and courtiers,” Katherine Duncan-Jones notes, was so well established even by 1600 that references to the poem as a young man's “sex manual,” or as a “handbook for wooers,” became a running joke in the Jacobean theater (496–97). Here again we might detect a historical continuity between early readers of *Venus and Adonis* and twenty-first century readers of pornography, as the running joke of Jacobean theater has a modern equivalent in the oft-repeated scenario of the adolescent male “caught” by his parents or teachers with a pornographic magazine. The joke in both instances defuses anxieties concerning pornography’s popularity by displacing interest in erotic material onto a single segment of the population when the sheer volume of erotic material consumed attests that it must appeal to a larger audience than adolescent males alone. For early modern art, as for contemporary art, the popularity of a work engenders suspicions about its readers’ intentions.

Although jokes about early modern pornography consumption may resemble modern ones, to compare *Venus and Adonis* to modern pornographic magazines proves disingenuous because erotic content in sixteenth-century writing simply fails to restrict itself to a “pornographic” or “artistic” audience. Gabriel Harvey dismissed *Venus and Adonis* as the sort of thing “the younger sort takes much delight in,” but as Duncan-Jones illustrates, he and others from the cultural elite of the day certainly read it (490). And it is not likely that they were scandalized by its sexual content. Sixteenth-century poetry, inspired as it was by Petrarch and Ovid, abounds with eroticism; yet there are no equivalent jokes about adolescent males pruriently poring over Shakespeare's sonnet sequences, or the sonnet sequences of Thomas Wyatt or Edmund Spenser. *Venus and Adonis* remarkably contains one of Shakespeare’s only prefaces, and
in it he expresses concerns that the poem will not live up to the aesthetic standards of the day, but he does not seem concerned in the slightest that the poem may be read by "lewd interpreters." Concerns about the poem's popular audience become palpable in the early nineteenth-century writing of Y.J., who encourages readers to revisit the poem and celebrates Shakespeare's aesthetic achievements but warns that the poem "is not a proper book to be in all hands" and should be "perused by the discriminating and curious in literature, rather than by those who seek amusement only" (72). But these distinctions between the "discriminating" critic and the average reader seeking "amusement" emerge out of a later period. With regards to Venus and Adonis's initial reception, the poem's sexual content and popularity alone do not necessarily make it pornographic. By explaining the history of the term in the OED and then exploring how the elements of the current 2006 definition can be adapted to suit premodern views on erotics, aesthetics, and sexuality, I will show that Shakespeare's mobilization of competing constructs of sexuality, namely lust and love, makes a pornographic reading of the poem both possible and plausible.

**Pornography in the OED**

The definition of pornography has undergone two major revisions since its first appearance in the OED, and both reflect pornography's development as a modern genre. Although pornography is variously defined in a range of legal and academic contexts, the OED serves as a valuable lens through which to trace the word's history, beginning with its English origins in 1857. Until very recently, the first recorded use of pornography was believed to come from a medical dictionary cited by the OED that defines it as the "description of prostitutes or of prostitution, as a matter of public hygiene."(def. 2). An earlier use of pornography is now listed under the 2006 definition, but the 1857 definition's long-held status as the first recorded instance of the word played an important role in shaping how scholars engage with "pornography" as a term. That this first definition should concern prostitutes and not sex comes as no surprise given that the word pornography begins with the Greek word for whore (Moulton 5). The reference to "public hygiene," however, hints at the perceived aversive effect such representations of sexual subjects have, not just on the individuals who consume them but also on the wider public. As Frank Mort and others have demonstrated, the sanitation initiatives and Disease Acts of the mid-nineteenth century reflect a strong correlation between sexuality and contamination (Mort
The 1857 English definition of pornography emerged, then, in the midst of a social panic about the destructive power of sexuality.

The definition from the 1989 second edition of the OED keeps the 1857 definition as the first entry, but includes the following second entry: “Description of the life, manners, etc., of prostitutes and their patrons; hence the expression or suggestion of obscene or unchaste subjects in literature or art” (def. 2a.). The 1989 definition intensifies the 1857 definition’s description of pornography as a corrupting type of representation unfit for public consumption by including the word obscene, which carries specific consequences from a legal standpoint. While obscenity in post-Reformation England remained largely under the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts, which focused their attention on censoring heresy, the declining power of these courts combined with the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 led the ordinary courts to take a far more active role in censoring obscenity in the eighteenth century. In twentieth-century Britain, censorship of pornography took place under the auspices of the 1959 Obscene Publications Act (OPA), which defined obscenity as material that tends to “deprave or corrupt the persons who are likely to . . . see, read or hear” but left a loophole protecting works deemed by experts to be of artistic merit. To explicitly reference the word obscene in the 1989 definition reflects pornography’s position in the twentieth century as a legally actionable form of representation and gives legal weight to distinctions between pornography and art.

In the 2006 revision, however, the OED removed the word obscene from the definition, listing pornography as “The explicit description or exhibition of sexual activity in literature, painting, films, etc., in a manner intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings” (def. 1a; 2006). Instead of positing a de facto link between sexual content and obscenity, the latest revision reconSIDERS the relationship between sexual content and social morality by emphasizing that sexual content can provoke either erotic or aesthetic feelings. By removing the reference to obscenity, the 2006 definition distances pornography from its contemporary legal considerations and provides the word with a new flexibility in which the key terms explicit, sexual, erotic, and aesthetic can be contextualized to account for the socio-cultural circumstances of pre-modern sexual representation.

Sexual and Explicit

While the OED’s 1989 definition provided a clear guide to determining pornography’s content—“the life, manners, etc., of prostitutes and their patrons”—
such descriptions clearly fail to address the range of topics and perspectives afforded by modern pornography. The 2006 definition addresses the genre's expansive range by removing any specific limits on content, emphasizing only that the material be an “explicit description or exhibition of sexual activity.” Rather than constitute pornography as a transhistorical genre organized by shared content, the new definition highlights instead that what we classify as pornography reflects what a particular culture in a particular moment deems to be sexual and explicit.

Nudity, for instance, draws attention to the culturally constructed nature of the sexually explicit, as different cultures sexualize different types of bodily exposure in different contexts. The deep décolletage of the early seventeenth century, which according to historians Francis M. Kelley and Randolph Schwabe breaks from the square cut pattern of the sixteenth century and “sinks down in a deep U, not infrequently leaving the breasts quite bare” (30), may convey purely sexual overtones to twenty-first-century viewers accustomed to associating cleavage with a woman’s desirability and sexual availability. Breasts, however, carry maternal and even nationalistic overtones as well as sexual ones in early modern England, so that their exposure is not, in and of itself, always entirely sexual. Sermons written in the 1680s against the fashion of bare breasts were focused not on the inappropriate eroticism of such fashions but on the corruption inherent in the French Catholic influence these fashions embodied at court. Rachel Trubowitz’s analysis of maternal imagery further suggests that breast-feeding was central to Jacobean narratives of proto-nationalism embodied by the newly invented “natural mother” who transmitted an “authentic Englishness” (187) to children via breast milk. Depictions of bare-breasted whores, witches, and transvestites that recur in popular print, Trubowitz argues, present the “unknowable antecedents” of this new motherhood, signaling with their bare breasts not sexual desirability or availability but a threat of national corruption (187). In The History of the Breast Marilyn Yalom observes that “the breast has been coded with both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ connotations since the beginning of recorded time. . . . When the ‘good’ breast model is in the ascendance,” she writes, “the accent falls on its power to nourish infants, or, allegorically, an entire religious or political community. . . . [w]hen the ‘bad’ vision dominates, the breast is an agent of enticement and even aggression” (4). Yalom identifies the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a transitional time when the medieval iconography of the “good” and “sacred” breast gave way to the “bad” and “erotic” breast of neoclassical art, only to
re-emerge by the end of the seventeenth century as the “domestic” and “political” breast. Exposed breasts are, therefore, not uncomplicatedly explicit or sexual in Elizabethan and Jacobean England but represent a host of overlapping political, ideological, and cultural meanings.

Yalom and Gail Kern Paster demonstrate in their studies that class also plays a role in determining the shape and appearance of the sexually appealing breast. Elizabethan and Jacobean culture sexualized smaller breasts over larger breasts, Paster argues, as husbands with financial means could “exercise erotic choice” by hiring wet nurses to breast-feed their children rather than having their wives do so. These husbands could keep their wives’ breasts as “exclusive object[s] of erotic desire” by preserving them from the infections, scarring, and sagging that could result from breast-feeding (Paster 204). Large breasts, though highly sexualized in modern pornography, function in seventeenth-century culture as “the female metonymy not only of age but of shame and thus of a specifically gendered form of social and bodily inferiority” (Paster 205). Peakman likewise notes that it was in response to changing cultural views on breast-feeding that “[b]ig breasts came to be relished” in the eighteenth century after they had been somewhat stigmatized in the seventeenth century (64). Thus bared breasts in the seventeenth century, although certainly sexual in many contexts, are never entirely sexual but rather reach out to issues of class and nationality in ways specific to the period.

Only with a nuanced understanding of the cultural contexts that surround the sexual body, therefore, can we accurately judge the circumstances that make various types of exposure both explicit and sexual. In the case of Venus and Adonis, neither Venus nor Adonis is explicitly nude in the poem, and although in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century portraits of the Ovidian scene typically one or both of Venus’s breasts are exposed (Ziegler 391), we may question whether such exposure would have been sexually pleasing to the sixteenth-century reader or whether deriving such pleasure would have been complicated by the reader’s sense that Venus perversely seeks to be both Adonis’s lover and mother.

Images of nudity often dominate discussions of modern pornography, perhaps because bodily exposure easily verifies an image’s explicitness, if not necessarily its sexual nature. Ovid’s Venus was a popular subject for early modern artists, and seventeenth-century publishers of Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis regularly produced illustrations that borrowed from this tradition to accompany the poem, but the 1593 text itself contains no illustrations. How then can
we measure the poem’s explicitness? The notorious passage in which Venus proposes “I’ll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer. / Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale; / Graze on my lips and if those hills be dry, / Stray lower, where pleasant fountains lie” (231–34) would in all likelihood pass the test of censors searching for explicit words. Yet the passage is provocatively explicit, as Eric Partridge demonstrates in Shakespeare’s Bawdy. The “mountain” and “dale” of Venus’s “park” evoke the curvaceous figure of Venus’s body, with specific reference perhaps to a mons Veneris and an adjacent “vulva-valley” or “rearward ravine” (Partridge 98). The non-euphemistic reference to Venus’s lips momentarily interrupts the topographical metaphor, but serves to situate the reader geographically so that the “pleasant fountains” below the lips reference Venus’s breasts. The lips might alternatively refer to the labia, and the fountains to the vulva and all its attendant moistures and secretions. Venus’s suggestion that Adonis feed on her “sweet bottom grass” in lines 235–36 proves not only explicit but also obscene, since by reading “sweet bottom grass” as pubic hair (Partridge 78) we may infer that Venus propositions Adonis with non-procreative (and hence immoral) oral sex. None of the words Partridge signals as explicit—deer, mountain, dale, fountains, and sweet bottom grass—are explicit in and of themselves. They, along with countless other words, are, however, easily pressed into describing explicit sexual activity. As a result, sexually explicit language in early modern England was not its own distinct collection of dedicated obscene words. On the contrary, as Venus and Adonis shows, sexually explicit language was often interchangeable with the language of the everyday. As Sarah Toulan points out in reference to seventeenth-century pornography, authors can use these simple words to “create an alternate language of the obscene,” in which the constant repetition of sexual euphemisms, combined with sexual cues like references to Venus and Cupid, can make everyday words “instantly recognizable in their double meaning” (11–12). Since sexually explicit words for which we now require a glossary like Partridge’s may have seemed blatant to early modern readers, we can conclude that the terms sexual and explicit serve as useful qualifiers in providing a definition of pornographic content that can incorporate the distinctions between sixteenth- and twenty-first-century culture.

“Erotic Rather than Aesthetic”

That Venus and Adonis is sexually explicit does not necessarily mean that it is pornographic. To return to the OED’s 2006 definition, for something to be
pornography it must not only represent sex in an explicit way but do so “in a manner intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings.” Both the aesthetic and the erotic theorize affect, whether pleasurable, terrifying, overwhelming, or otherwise, but can the erotic or the aesthetic really be distinct “feelings” in and of themselves? If “aesthetic” presents the highbrow, cerebral effect a representation of sex produces in a work of art, then does “erotic,” by contrast, represent not just the sexual nature of a representation (since that is already a given) but also a lurking bawdiness (or, more precisely, a lurking awareness of the body and its involuntary responses) figured in the representation’s transgressive, lowbrow ability to sexually arouse its audience? Such a distinction proves problematic. The 2006 definition appears to revive the 1857 phrasing of pornography’s effect on “hygiene” by invoking a discourse of affective bodily purity. But to assume that we can identify erotic pleasure based on tangible evidence of physical arousal and aesthetic pleasure based on intangible intellectual stimulation surely misses the psychological underpinnings of sexual response and misrepresents the complexity of aesthetic experience.

In a poem like *Venus and Adonis*, where Venus at once embodies the abstract concept of love and plays the stereotypically comic role of the greensick woman overcome by sexual appetite, aesthetic and erotic effects prove mutually constitutive. Though contemporary scholars of early modern pornography maintain that eroticism and aestheticism are far from antithetical in sixteenth-century texts, scholars from the nineteenth century onwards have invested much of their energy in differentiating the poem’s morally educative aesthetic effects from its lewd erotic ones. Philip C. Kolin notes the immense range of approaches to the poem in his introductory essay to *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*, but he nevertheless points to a telling distinction between the two major camps of *Venus and Adonis* scholarship—those in the moralist camp, who “valorize the poem as a philosophical/theological statement” and celebrate its aesthetic superiority as allegory (16), and those in the camp of the flesh, who “interrogate and destabilize objections voiced earlier by seventeenth-century moralists” and other critics to “embrace a lively celebration of sexuality” in the poem (19). Yet as Kolin and many other critics have remarked, the numerous elements at work in the poem fail to coalesce into a singular statement or effect.

Given that explicit representations of sex in the sixteenth century use common words to create their erotic effects, we should not be surprised to find erotically charged material within early modern texts that scholars have
categorized as aesthetically valuable. As Toulalan notes, “Whereas modern pornography, whether literary or visual, has become restricted to the representation of images of the sexual body and the body engaged in sexual acts, the pornography of the seventeenth century suffered no such limitation” (9). She maintains that early modern texts “did not restrict themselves to repeated descriptions of the sexual act, but interspersed other sorts of material, such as philosophical discussion or comic narrative, with the sexual” (9). Since scholars recognize that pre-modern texts demonstrate less-rigid distinctions between sexually arousing and intellectually stimulating content than modern texts do, the next step is to rethink and recontextualize the conclusions we draw about genre and readership based on distinctions between a text’s erotic and aesthetic effects.

From a twenty-first-century standpoint, the distinction between aesthetically pleasing and erotically pleasing texts has roots in legislative measures like the OPA, which distinguished obscene works from those with artistic merit without qualifying what should constitute as merit. Such legislation relies, however, on a set of common twenty-first century assumptions about pornography as an indecent expression of sexuality. In the context of the OPA, for instance, does a text’s ability to arouse count toward its literary merit or must publishers prove in court that the merit of a text outweighs its arousing potential? The 2006 Criminal Justice and Immigration Act, introduced in Britain, likewise permits the possession of “extreme pornography” if the accused can provide a “legitimate reason” for possessing it. Does sexual stimulation qualify as a legitimate reason? Like the OED’s 2006 definition, the law provides no specifics about how to make the distinction between proper and improper representations of sex. Nor is it necessary to do since we can likely intimate the answers to these questions based on our understanding of pornography’s place in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as a popular but culturally stigmatized genre. Since the OED’s 2006 definition provides few clues as to how to interpret the distinction between erotic and aesthetic feeling, readers must rely on their own culturally specific notions of erotic and aesthetic feelings. Since the definition thus requires contextualization as a matter of course, we might just as productively contextualize it for the sixteenth century as for the twenty-first.

To recontextualize the definition of pornography for the sixteenth century, however, presents the problem of anachronism, since nearly all pornography scholars locate the English origins of the genre in the eighteenth century and
specifically link its development to the rise of "modern" culture. In The Invention of Pornography, one of the first collections of essays dedicated unambiguously to historicizing pornography (and not sexuality and erotica) before the nineteenth century, Lynn Hunt yokes pornography to modernity, arguing that "pornography came into existence both as a literary and visual practice and as a category of understanding at the same time as—and concomitantly with—the long-term emergence of Western modernity" (10). Hunt's work strives perhaps to move pornography out of the margins of scholarly inquiry, insisting on its relevance to investigations of modern print culture, to modern subjectivity, and to notions of the public and private. Yet her chronology seems to read pre-nineteenth-century pornography in anticipation of the modern genre, tracing continuities between sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century pornography across Western Europe in a way that misses key differences between England and continental Europe, as well as between the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.

In acknowledging both the connotations of pornography as a modern genre and the factors that distinguish sixteenth-century from modern England, Ian Frederick Moulton rejects the term pornography while at the same time aligning his research with the trajectory Hunt proposes. Moulton adopts the term "erotic writing" instead, defining it as "any text, regardless of genre or literary quality, that deals in a fundamental way with human physical sexual activity" (5). Moulton's definition of pornography, however, makes his reasons for rejecting pornography clear. Pornography, in Moulton's widest definition, includes not only depictions of sexual activity but also representations that "are seen by some observers as being offensive or morally reprehensible" (3). Moulton's definition echoes the OED's 1989 definition, highlighting the connection between sex and obscenity that stigmatized the modern genre as morally objectionable. Hunt also takes this connection for a given in her study of pornography, which is subtitled Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, but while both Moulton and Hunt acknowledge that the connection between eroticism and obscenity has a historical basis in the nineteenth century, neither proposes that we re-evaluate pornography's connection to obscenity in a sixteenth-century context. Using a definition of pornography based on its modern form and characteristics, Moulton concludes that although sixteenth-century erotic writing is not pornography, it is nevertheless part of the modern genre's "prehistory" (5).
But what if we considered pornography to be a term rather than a genre? Toulalan takes this approach in her 2007 work, Imagining Sex. Toulalan adopts the term pornography to discuss a range of printed seventeenth-century texts, but by making pornography a "type of representation" and not a genre, she avoids pigeonholing pornography within its modern iteration (3). While Moulton also suggests that we conceive of pornography as a type of reading experience rather than a genre, he defines this reading experience "by an obsessive interest in the material read, an abstraction of the self and an abdication of critical faculties, and a sense of voyeurism—of observing without being observed in return," and he goes on to write that "[p]ornographic reading would often be followed by a lingering sense of disgust, guilt, or sheepishness which nonetheless would not preclude an urge to repeat the experience" (11). Although what qualifies as pornography remains subjective in terms of content, Moulton seems to propose that reactions to pornography cannot be subjective or varied. Toulalan, by contrast, writes that pornography "is not only a 'thing'" or genre but that "it is also thought to do something. It thus becomes something that is judged to have a social effect, and therefore about which moral judgements can be made" (3). Toulalan does not make these judgments herself but leaves pornography instead as an open-ended process, an ongoing relation between author, text, and reader that can be adapted to the particularities of any society's system of moral judgments.

Toulalan's project breaks from Moulton's and Hunt's in that she does not erect a stable concept of modern pornography in order to measure representations of sexuality in the seventeenth century. Instead, she extracts pornography from its modern connotations and recontextualizes it in the seventeenth century. Her research suggests that we might debunk the notion that erotic feelings are somehow inferior to aesthetic feelings, as she argues that the social imperative to reproduce makes sexual pleasure (psychological and genital) a morally admirable pursuit, not simply an unavoidable physiological imperative. Although Toulalan specifically argues that she is not interested in writing a "history" of pornography—that is, a teleology of pornography that ties the term back to the modern genre—her work allows us to historicize representations of sexuality in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as distinct from modern representations.

Establishing a definition of pornography that is distinct from the modern genre allows us to engage with modern theories of pornographic consumption while attending to the specific context of early modern pornographic
circulation. Before popular print made sexually explicit materials available to non-elite segments of the population, the perceived moral risk of such materials was low, and so works containing erotically stimulating materials were not segregated from aesthetically stimulating ones. Despite laws against public display of obscene material, “[a]ction taken against printers and booksellers for ‘obscene’ publications” were in the early modern period “a minuscule proportion of the authorities’ attempts to regulate the press,” as they were far more concerned with sedition than with obscenity (Toulalan 42). Since erotically pleasing material could therefore be found alongside aesthetically pleasing material in early modern England, both within texts and within the venues where the texts were sold, the privileging of the erotic rather than the aesthetic feelings that pornography produces appears to be a feature of the modern genre and does not accurately describe early modern forms of pornography. As Venus and Adonis illustrates, the erotic and the aesthetic aspects of sixteenth-century texts do not necessarily work against each other but instead provide a source of tension that speaks to larger social anxieties concerning extra-marital and non-procreative sex. The range of critical responses to the poem demonstrates that perhaps it is not the text but the poem’s modern readers who produce the distinction between erotic and aesthetic effects. If pornography in a pre-modern context cannot rely on a stable distinction between erotic and aesthetic works, then it might rely instead on a reading process wherein both erotic and aesthetic pleasures are brought into tension to be fully resolved by the reader, not the author or critic.

“Aesthetic” Love and “Erotic” Lust:
Pleasure and Morality in Venus and Adonis

That we most often find the erotic entwined with the aesthetic in early modern literature suggests that the two terms are not particularly useful tools when it comes to tracing how representations of sexuality support or challenge the moral codes and social norms that inform sixteenth-century notions of pleasure. How then can we contextualize the relationship between the pleasure pornography produces and the moral strictures placed on sexual expression in the sixteenth century? In asking this question I return to Toulalan’s definition of pornography as a discourse “thought to do something . . . something that is judged to have a social effect, and therefore about which moral judgements can be made” (3). Since both aesthetic and erotic pleasures are
available to readers in sixteenth-century texts, how might these readers have made such moral judgments about the social effects of either? Moulton’s study argues that erotic writing in the sixteenth century, much of which was Italian or Italian-influenced, was perceived to threaten and corrupt English masculinity by effeminating its writers and readers. Toulalan’s study conversely posits that the seventeenth-century connection between pleasure and conception provides a niche for pornography within the moral order that governed sexual reproduction in the period. I wish to add a specifically social dimension to the categories of aesthetic and erotic by mapping out the distinction between the two in terms early modern authors and readers might have recognized as separate—love and lust. Like the distinction between aesthetic and erotic, the differences between the pleasures (and pains) of love and those of lust are highly subjective and not easily distinguished from one another. Yet in sixteenth-century society, where sexual pleasure holds a positive, pro-social connotation so long as it is the product of procreative marital sex, lust serves as sexual pleasure’s moral boundary, so that in distinguishing love from lust we can approach the question of how pornography might have affected readers and how readers might have derived pleasure in reading pornographically while still fulfilling their moral and social obligations.

In mobilizing “love” as a pro-social iteration of aesthetic pleasure and “lust” as an antisocial iteration of erotic pleasure, I am not suggesting that sixteenth-century pornography represents and incites only lust. Although the OED’s definition requires that we pick one form of pleasure over another in defining pornography, I maintain that with respect to sixteenth-century texts pornography involves a state of tension between the aesthetic and the erotic that readers resolve for themselves. The distinction between love and lust likewise emerges as a negotiation rather than a stable boundary in representations of sex in the sixteenth century. As Catherine Belsey argues, love and lust are “not consistently used as antitheses” in the early modern period (271). After outlining a history of both terms, including seventeenth-century reactions to Venus and Adonis, Belsey posits that the “emergence of a radical distinction between the two—a process inadvertently encouraged, it turns out, by the voice of Adonis—marks a moment in the cultural history of desire that, as modern criticism unwittingly reveals, has proved formative for our own cultural norms and values” (271). This failed distinction between love and lust forms the core of Belsey’s argument that love in the poem is a “trompe-l’oeil”—that although it appears to establish a “taxonomy” of desire, the poem ultimately “refuses to
yield the gratification of a secret meaning, a moral truth concealed behind the
folds of its heterogeneous textuality” (282). To substitute love and lust as terms
for the 2006 definition's aesthetic and erotic is therefore to recontextualize the
definition of pornography for the sixteenth century by importing a debate relevant
to that century's sense of sexual morality.

Since the moral dilemma Venus and Adonis poses to its readers concerns
whether the sexuality Venus exudes, and deploys in order to get Adonis to re-
ciprocate, expresses love or lust, Venus and Adonis allows us to test a definition
of pornography as a reading process that brings into tension pro-social expres-
sions of sex (love) and antisocial expressions of sex (lust) to be resolved by the
reader. First, the poem encourages a pornographic reading by blurring distinc-
tions between love and lust in ways that reflect sixteenth-century social obliga-
tions governing sexual expression. Venus is instantly recognizable as the god-
ness of love in the poem, but in extricating himself from her various attempts
to convince, compel, and coerce him, Adonis protests: “Call it not love, for Love
to heaven is fled / Since sweating Lust on earth usurped his name” (793–94).
Venus’s actions are twice ascribed to lust, first when she “kissing speaks, with
lustful language” (47) and again when her “careless lust stirs up a desperate
courage” to forget “shame’s pure blush” when she kisses Adonis into uncon-
senting submission (556). Adonis’s skepticism about Venus’s “love” may well be
warranted, for as a “boldfaced suitor” (5), Venus promises “kisses” (18) and
“sport” (24) but no type of commitment. The stereotype that women desire a
commitment from their partners before they will consent to sexual relation-
ships while men wish to engage in as much sex as possible with as few commit-
ments as possible (i.e. that women seek love while men pursue their lusts) does
not seem to hold in this poem, although depositions from early modern bas-
tardy trials attest to the relevance of this stereotype in this period.4

Lynn Enterline and others read the poem as a clever inversion of Petrarchan
gender roles, where Venus adopts the “conventionally ‘masculine’ position of
[the] imploring Petrarchan suitor driven to plead a case with a reluctant object
of desire [the emasculated Adonis]” (Enterline 465). But by setting aside the
idea that Venus’s active desire makes her masculine and Adonis feminine, we
can reinterpret Adonis’s lack of arousal to signify more than his impending
castration. Adonis’s specific complaints against Venus, that he “hate[s] not love
but [her] device in love, / That lends embracements unto every stranger” (789–
90), suggests that he does not oppose sexual pleasure but rather opposes sexual
pleasure that does not spring from any pre-existing or future relationship. His
next statement, "You do it for increase. Oh, strange excuse, / When reason is the bawd to lust’s abuse!" (791–92), points to one of the central reasons why partners thought it prudent to require a commitment before engaging in sexual activity—offspring. Upon encountering Adonis, Venus makes several appeals to him, many of which emphasize—reasonably, as Adonis remarks—the vital role sexuality plays in preserving the culture and beauty of a society from extinction. In several lines, such as "Thou wast begot; to beget it is thy duty" (168), Venus promotes sex for procreative purposes as if she thinks she might convince Adonis that procreation were a noble goal in and of itself; but since land, title, and power passed in patriarchal England from fathers to legitimate heirs, the "afterlife" Venus claims a man’s offspring will afford resides in a man’s being able to recognize them publicly as his children. While men and women were morally and spiritually bound to limit sex to marital, procreative unions, they were also legally bound to do so by "secular magistrates, who were charged with punishing fornicators and establishing the paternity of illegitimate children, and [by] the church courts, whose responsibility was the moral crimes of adultery and fornication" (Gowing 85). Although the punishments for men who fathered illegitimate children were considerably lighter than those for women (Gowing 185), the low birthrate of illegitimate children at the turn of the seventeenth century, coupled with the high rate of bridal pregnancy, suggests that men as well as women were conscious of the considerable long-term consequences of extramarital sex. In denying Venus, Adonis is protecting himself as an unmarried youth from the damage that fathering an illegitimate child would inflict on his reputation, future marriage prospects, and economic stability. In refusing Venus, Adonis also fulfills early modern expectations that male rationality should rule over uncontrollable female desire, even though legal evidence from the period illustrates that desire was by no means the exclusive province of women and that women tended to rationally weigh the potentially life-altering consequences of extramarital sexuality more carefully before engaging in such relationships. Nevertheless, Adonis’s lack of arousal when Venus tackles him may suggest not that he lacks virility but that he possesses a control over his physical desires that women were purported to lack according to humoral theories of gendered sexual desire. Adonis may be highly exceptional in this regard, but his behavior still fits into a common construction of masculine, not feminine, sexuality.

While Petrarchan sonnets construct a version of love that ignores the social dimensions of courtship in favor of an entirely artificial dialogue between a
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suffering suitor and an all-powerful silent beloved, Adonis bursts Venus's Petrarchan bubble by remaining unaffected by her advances. Only after Adonis's death does Venus see for herself the complications that arise when considering sex outside an idealized Petrarchan sphere. The "love" driving Venus in the beginning of the poem is thus an asocial kind that finds expression only in sexual gratification, and not in bonds between people committed to each other under the eyes of God, family, or society. The "love" she curses at the end of the poem, a love that she says "shall be cause of war and dire events/ And set dissention twixt the son and sire" (1159–60), lays out by contrast the complications to which sexual gratification gives rise in a social environment. Whether Venus's desire for Adonis before his death was an Edenic asocial love or whether Adonis correctly interpreted it as antisocial lust (i.e. sex not in the service of creating legitimate heirs), the poem implicates love in the social realm by emphasizing its social consequences, while sex without consequences remains the province of the artificial, constructed forest.

But how do these competing concepts of pro-social love and antisocial lust help determine whether or not we can define Venus and Adonis as pornographic? Discussions to date have often subtly employed the distinction between erotic and aesthetic effects to argue that because critics find the poem to be an aesthetically pleasing work of art, it cannot be pornography—no matter how erotically pleasing it is. David Bevington writes in his introduction to the poem that Shakespeare's allegory of love "elevates the seriousness" of the poem by "adding poetic dignity to what might otherwise appear to be an unabashedly erotic poem" (1655). He adds that as readers we should not "fail to acknowledge our own erotic pleasure" in the poem's "graphic" double entendres and "sexual teasing," but maintains that Shakespeare avoids "being pornographic" while still channeling the explicitly "naughty' Ovid of the Ars Amatoria" (1655). Bevington's concept of pornography clearly emphasizes the distinction of aesthetic over erotic effect, since in Bevington's view Shakespeare's allegory of love supersedes his eroticism and the poem's sexual content can be deflected away from Shakespeare and pushed onto his "naughty" source.

Arguments for the poem's pornographic potential prove no less rooted in the modern connotations of the genre, which hold that aestheticism and eroticism cannot coexist in a work of pornography. In Richard Halpern's view, Venus and Adonis alternates between being a work of pornography and an aesthetic object, where for its female readers the two modes of pleasure cannot overlap. Halpern writes that "[w]hile Venus and Adonis announces itself as an
Appolonian exercise as pure as the Castalian spring, it is in fact a piece of soft-core pornography” (379). He first contrasts Shakespeare's aspirations at an elite male readership with recurring early seventeenth-century references to young female readers “hiding copies of the poem about their persons or rooms, and imbibing loose morals or illicit sexual pleasures” (378) from them to establish a distinction between how Shakespeare intended the poem to be read and how others of the period supposed it was read by young women. Halpern's focus on a female readership (when similar references exist concerning a young male readership) serves as the platform from which he embarks on a problematically modern reading of early modern pornographic consumption. Female readers, he contends, identify with Venus to the point that they become profoundly aroused by Adonis only to become as frustrated as Venus becomes in the poem, when, as she urges Adonis to mount her, she discovers that “all is imaginary” (Shakespeare line 596) because she has failed to arouse him. Venus's "frenzied efforts at sexual consumption make her precisely into an image of the consumer of a pornographic text," Halpern argues, by which he means she (and her readers) becomes "unsatisfied" and "empty" by the absence of the phallus (383). According to Halpern, the poem fails to be pornographic for the female reader when Adonis's erection fails to materialize, and so the text itself must assume the place of the phallus as the aesthetic object of the female reader's frustrated desires. Inferior erotic pleasure, he argues, gives way to a more lasting aesthetic pleasure halfway through the poem.

Halpern's argument that Venus and Adonis is, however fleetingly, pornographic relies on assumptions about pornographic consumption informed by stereotypes about the modern pornographic genre. As Halpern writes, a consumer of pornography “does not 'read' in the academic sense, insofar as this activity suggests some attention to the literary or figurative status of the text. Rather, pornography requires, at least at some level, a naive submission to the representational claims of the work” (384). As I have endeavored to demonstrate in the previous section of this essay, this claim may arguably be true of modern pornography, where distinctions between aestheticism and eroticism are routinely reinforced, but to claim that to read pornography is to disengage one's critical faculties fails to take into account the context of sexual representation in which sixteenth-century readers were regularly expected to enjoy both aesthetic and erotic pleasures in complex ways.

Further, while sexual satisfaction may be impossible for Venus, to assume that female readers identified so simplistically with Venus seems to discount
the complexity with which Shakespeare treats gendered scripts of courtship in
the poem. Focusing on the characters as objects of sexual fantasy while ignor-
ing the fantasies of asocial and pro-social sexuality each character puts forth in
his or her arguments is equally problematic. For the male Elizabethan reader,
as Duncan-Jones remarks, "Venus and Adonis was above all a poem which ex-
emplified the rhetoric of courtship. It was entrancing, sexually exciting, and
open to numberless fresh applications" (497). By giving to Venus the tradi-
tional arguments of the male suitor seeking copulation and to Adonis the argu-
ments for chastity, Shakespeare already unsettles any traditional patterns of
gender identification that readers might bring to the poem. Given that the
markers of male and female gender performance are likewise blurred in the
poem by Venus's bold physicality and Adonis's delicate beauty and passivity,
the arguments of either character for or against sex prove to be the most stable
aspects with which readers can identify. "The fact that Venus's advances to
Adonis are unsuccessful seems to have been scarcely heeded," Duncan-Jones
observes; indeed, "[m]any early readers, like William Reynolds, responded
most warmly to Venus's wooing speeches, often making a powerfully personal
identification with her" (497). That Adonis is not aroused by Venus's sexually
explicit seduction does not mean that the reader, male or female, will not find
sexual satisfaction in the poem. To be aroused by Venus's seduction is to en-
gage in a fantasy about sex without consequences, a fantasy that would not be
tolerated in the world outside the poem. Yet to dismiss the fantasy simply be-
cause it cannot be realized outside the imaginary world of the text is to under-
estimate the power of the erotic imagination to provide readers with the plea-
sure of mentally enacting desires made impossible by their religious, social,
and familial responsibilities.

Venus and Adonis can therefore be called pornographic insofar as it repre-
sents sex in an explicit way and draws the distinction between love and lust into
question to be resolved by the reader. Readers not aroused by Venus (like
Adonis) can interpret Venus as lustful and opt out of the potential pleasures of
the transgressive erotic fantasy, while readers aroused by Venus can indulge in
Venus's fantasy of asocial love (or with her frequently humorous attempts to
legitimize lust by using the familiar rhetoric of courtship to advance her de-
sires). Such readers can enjoy the full erotic pleasures of the text with the added
satisfaction of seeing Adonis suffer for his choice to hunt the boar instead of
visiting Venus. Readers may also conceivably enjoy the transgressive tension
Venus's seduction provides along with the added "aesthetic" pleasure of seeing
carnal love allegorically revealed in the end to be the enemy of peace and order in the world. Since the text makes all of these readings possible, there is little to gain from labeling this work as part of an exclusively pornographic genre, or to argue that it stimulates only erotic feelings. To call Venus and Adonis pornography is rather to highlight a reading process wherein readers must negotiate their own attitudes toward the function of sex and pleasure while balancing pleasure and fantasy with their moral and social obligation to produce legitimate heirs.

To make the term pornography useful in a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century context, therefore, we might best conceive of it as a reading process, not a genre, where pornography refers to an interaction between reader and text, not to text or to authorial intent alone. Although the OED’s current definition of pornography phrases this interaction in terms of a text’s predominating erotic effect rather than an aesthetic one, the categories of erotic and aesthetic have modern connotations concerning content and obscenity that do not reflect the ways sexually explicit materials circulated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Since erotic and aesthetic are imprecise terms with reference to the moral judgments early modern readers might have made about representations of sex, I have suggested that we add a social dimension to such moral judgments by figuring aesthetic pleasures as discourses of love (in which sex holds a pro-social valence) and erotic pleasures as discourses of lust (in which sex, though still pleasurable, holds an antisocial valence). By shining a light on the relationship between text, reader, and context, such definitions of pornography show that the sexual pleasure this mode provides can be both moral and sensual, both pro-social and antisocial, and that to understand the place of sex in a given culture we must understand how morality and sexuality can coincide.

NOTES

1. The 2006 definition includes a new reference to pornography in William Smith’s 1842 book A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities where “pornography” appears among “all the lower classes of art.” This earlier reference supports scholars’ assertions that the word has Greek roots.

2. See Hyde 154.

3. See McShane Jones, 43-44.


5. As Stephen Orgel has noted, men and women’s reproductive organs were in Galenic medicine thought to be homologous, with sexual differentiation occurring as a result of
men's inner heat pushing their genitals outwards of their bodies. This Galenic view explains women's sexual insatiability as their desire for a heat that they lack, since women are thought to be "cold" and "clammy" in humoral terms (Paster 79). Robert Burton, in a seventeenth-century work of popular, humoral theory-based medicine entitled The Anatomy of Melancholy, treats sexual desire as a kind of melancholy that men can cure by achieving hormonal balance. While Burton promotes exercise and diet to men afflicted by love, he maintains with regards to women that "the best and surest remedy of all, is to see them well placed, and married to good husbands in due time ... that's the primary cause, and this the ready cure, to give them content to their desires" (417). Men, in Burton's view, can manage their sexual urges through self-discipline while women's sexual urges must be met through marriage. Leaving a woman's sexual needs unmet, according to Burton, could bring on a host of other serious medical ailments.

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